

phobia - reddie by teehee_imsad

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Summary:

It's September 1992.

Richie Tozier is 6'0 and hot.

Eddie Kaspbrak is a gay disaster.

Welcome to the losers club.

1. TRIGGER WARNINGS

So I decided that instead of putting a trigger warning at the beginning of every chapter, I would list them off here, so please read this before the story!

Warnings include:

- Strong language
- Anxiety and panic attacks
- Usage of homophobic slurs
- Violence and bullying
- Mentions of abuse
- Mentions of self-harm
- Dudes being gay (show me your dick, Steve)

Also, this is not about romanticizing mental illness! There is nothing k i n k y about having a panic attack! Get ur life together, scrub.

I will update this list as I continue to write. If you have any questions, feel free to ask.

2. Unspoken

Richie Tozier got hot.

A few years ago, he was this closeted gay little boy, constantly suppressing his emotions with humor. Now, he's still the same, he's just not little anymore. Being six feet tall at 16 may seem daunting to some, but not to him. For once, he feels like he has the upper-hand over all the losers. Now, he's not in their shadows.

So now he was tall, and hot, but he would never think the latter about himself.

But someone did think that about Richie, someone he had spent endless nights with, hiding away in the comfort of the clubhouse, even with all the spiders. They didn't even need to speak when they were together, for they both felt that the others' presence was comforting enough. He was Richie's best friend.

Eddie Kaspbrak.

Eddie would never tell Richie that he felt this way though. Until Richie says something about the not-so-secret carving on the kissing bridge, Eddie wouldn't say something about his own carving, a large "r" inside of a heart. Eddie knew Richie felt *something* about him, though neither would speak up. Maybe it was the internalized homophobia they both felt about themselves, but regardless, their feelings would be left unspoken.

And Eddie had no confidence whatsoever of telling Richie, especially now that he was way more attractive, because back when he first got this crush, they were both awkward little geeks. Now only Eddie was an awkward little geek.

Richie didn't think that though. Richie thought Eddie was the most amazing person ever, with his large brown eyes and light dusting of beauty marks. Eddie was just the right height for him, his head meeting just below Richie's shoulders. Yet, still, their feelings remained unspoken.

Well, only until junior year.

Notes for the Chapter:

yep this sucks but it gets better ok

3. First Day

"Shit," Eddie huffed out as he bolted upright in bed, desperately hoping his mother wouldn't wake up to the sound. He glanced over at his alarm clock, it read 7:30 am, which gave him just enough time to get ready and make it to school at 8:15. He let out a small sigh of relief, yet his reassurance was short-lived, once he remembered it was the first day of school.

His breath quickened a little. He wasn't ready to be a junior, wasn't ready for all of the people, the questions. Wasn't ready for the endless days and the hard assignments, for the anxiety, the long nights spent crying alone.

He wasn't ready.

Ever since *It* attacked, and since he started high school soon after, Eddie wasn't the same. He was constantly paranoid, always jumping at the slightest things. The losers noticed this too, but it still got bad sometimes. Every now and then something would trigger it...

and today that trigger was school.

His breathing turned from sharp, quick inhales to full-on wheezing. He couldn't breathe. Dread filled his mind, filled the room. He gasped for air.

I can't do this I can't do this I can't do this

He began rocking back and forth, clutching his knees as his tears stained his pajama pants. It felt endless. His nails dug into his palms, leaving red marks on his skin. He wanted to feel something, anything other than this. The pain fell out in stifled cries, it echoed in his mind.

Why why why why why

His eyes were glued shut. He couldn't hear anything other than his thoughts, pounding against his head. He couldn't do this. Well, that's what he thought at least. His agony felt so loud, he almost didn't hear

the hard knock on his window.

It was Richie.

Once he saw Eddie curled up on the floor, he didn't hesitate to push open the window, eyebrows furrowed behind his thick glasses frame.

"Eddie..." Richie pleaded as he sat down softly next to him, wrapping both arms around his small frame. "Eddie, talk to me, please." He placed his head gently on the curve of Eddie's shoulder, and his frame softened a little. Eddie stopped his rocking, but didn't answer Richie. "Eds, I want to help, but you gotta tell me what's wrong." Eddie nestled further into his embrace, yet his breathing was still harsh and loud, and tears were still sliding down his cheeks, soaking into Richie's shirt. Richie didn't care about that in the slightest.

"I... don't know..." Eddie spoke out quietly in between gasps, even though it was a lie. He knew all too well why his anxiety was acting up, he just didn't want to talk about it. Richie knew this, because he knew Eddie.

Sometimes he knew Eddie more than Eddie himself.

Sometimes.

"I knew something was wrong before I even came here." He paused for a moment, pondering what to say next. He tightened their hug, moving one hand on the back of Eddie's head to console him. "It was like... I could sense you weren't okay." He snorted, plastering a fake smile across his face, hoping it would make Eddie feel a little better. "It sounds weird, doesn't it? I guess weird is kinda my thing anyway." Richie shrugged a little bit.

And Eddie smiled.

It was small, but Richie could feel it against his chest. He also noticed that Eddie's breathing slowed down a little bit, but he was still struggling to breathe properly. Eddie's stomach was sore from wheezing so harshly.

"Hey..." Richie spoke again, softly while stroking Eddie's soft brown hair. "Just take a deep breath." Richie began slowly inhaling and

exhaling, and slowly, Eddie began to match his pace, eventually calming down. He let go of his knees, and wrapped his arms around Richie's waist.

"Th-thank you..." Eddie stuttered. Richie sighed.

"Of course." He planted a small kiss on the top of Eddie's head. "The next time you start to feel like this, call me. Okay?" Eddie nodded in response. "My parents never answer the phone anyway." He laughed.

Eddie grinned this time, looking up at Richie. Their faces were merely inches apart. Richie's face became hot out of embarrassment, so he looked away, laughing awkwardly.

"Y-you okay to get ready for school?" He asked.

"I think so." Eddie said, while wiping his face with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. Richie helped him to his feet. He looked right into Richie's eyes, a warm smile from ear to ear. "Again, thank you."

"Anything for my Eddie Spaghetti." He said looking away, flustered, ruffling Eddie's hair. Eddie rolled his eyes in response, but kept smiling.

They managed to get ready, only facing a couple of problems when Eddie's anxiety kicked back in, but it was nothing Richie couldn't handle. They swung by Richie's house so he could throw on a couple of school clothes as well, and grab his backpack, before getting to school just as classes were starting. They parted to get to their classrooms, exchanging simple goodbyes as they did. Eddie was scared to start his day, Richie was scared for him as well. Yet, Eddie made it through his classes somehow.

All he did was remember what Richie told him,

Just take a deep breath.

So he did.

4. Oasis

"Hey." Eddie spoke softly to Stan. "Ready to go?" He waited as Stan packed up his things in the classroom as everyone else filed out of the room, flowing around them like a sea of adolescence.

"Yep." Stan stated in response, proudly sliding his backpack on over his shoulders. They nodded at each other, then made their way out of the classroom to meet the rest of the losers. They were all squished onto one bench, Beverly and Bill being on top since they were the lightest, Ben and Mike on the bottom, and Richie just leaning on the side of the bench while sitting on the ground. Eddie saw Richie perk up as they approached.

"Hey, guys." Mike pitched in before Richie could say anything.

"Care to explain?" Stan said, steering his gaze to the strange pile of teenagers who decided personal space was overrated. Beverly giggled.

"Bennie was cold." she cooed. Ben elbowed her lightly on the shoulder.

"Still doesn't explain why the rest of you are piled together." He raised one eyebrow.

"To be honest, I don't even really know." Mike joined in. "It just... happened?"

"How-" Eddie spoke. "What-" He didn't understand in the slightest, which caused everyone, including himself, to laugh. The losers were weird, but they were weird together. The entire time Richie hadn't spoken, taking in the comfort of their conversation. When they were all together, it felt like an oasis, providing water in the driest, hottest days. Eddie shifted his sight to Richie, noticing his genuine smile. It made him happy, too. Richie looked over to meet Eddie's gaze, locking eyes for a moment. It wasn't awkward or forced. They smiled, sharing the feeling they both had, it radiated through them. While the losers continued their conversation, Richie and Eddie shared glances, exchanging soft, genuine smiles that filled the air with

warmth.

Mike noticed them through his seemingly omniscient eyes, but left his curiosity aside for the moment. He'd let them be, for now.

The losers eventually split up, well-knowing that they each had their own work to do. While the rest parted off on their own, Eddie and Richie stayed behind for a bit. Mike saw this, but continued on his way home.

"I like being all together." Richie began. "They feel like family, like a home away from home, ya know?" He sighed.

"Yeah, I'm really glad Bev could move back, I missed her a lot when she was away."

"Me too."

Warmth was heavy in the air. The conversation paused at the moment, but it wasn't awkward. Just being together felt nice, like a gentle reassurance that they weren't alone.

That they had each other.

"How was your day?" Richie picked up the conversation again. "Any more panic attacks?" Eddie simply shook his head in response.

"I remembered what you said, about breathing." Richie looked up at him as he spoke. "So anytime I started feeling anxious I would take deep breaths and think of how short the day was, how it would end soon, and how little time there would be before I could see you." Richie's eyes widened, and as soon as Eddie realized what he had just said, his eyes widened too. "I-I mean, before I could see you guys." He coughed, scratching the back of his neck, which he tended to do when he got nervous. *Fuck, Eddie.* He thought. *Way to be discreet.*

Eddie was lost in thought when Richie spoke again. "I was worried the whole day." he laughed nervously. "But I'm really glad it turned out okay."

"Yeah..."

Now it was awkward.

"Um... do you wanna..." Eddie muttered "Hang out at my house? I know you probably have homework, but my mom's away, so I was thinking we could watch a scary movie."

"YES" Richie shouted in response, a little too loudly and a little too abruptly. So now he had to lighten the mood. "Though it's sad to hear that Mrs. K's not there, I was hoping we'd make it more than a one-night stand." His joke was a little softer, and a little less vulgar than usual, maybe due to the tension between them, but it was still a classic Trashmouth move.

So Eddie elbowed him lightly, "Beep beep, Richie." He rolled his eyes.

Yet the conversation somehow carried itself, as they walked along the neatly paved roads to Eddie's house. Richie constantly making jokes, and Eddie trying to act mad but secretly wanting to laugh. It didn't really matter though, Richie knew he loved his jokes, Eddie even loved his annoying nicknames, but he would never admit it. And he didn't need to, because it was an unspoken understanding that they loved each other, even if it was platonic.

At least they thought they loved each other platonically.

But it was romantic on both sides.

5. Movie Night

Eddie and Richie were deep in conversation when they arrived at Eddie's house. Just as Eddie stated earlier, his mom wasn't home, which meant he was actually allowed to watch something scary for once. As much as he thought that horror movies were disgusting, Eddie couldn't stop watching them. He knew that some of this stuff could actually happen, because it happened to him.

As weird as it may seem, horror movies gave him reassurance. He didn't really know how, but they did. And watching them, he learned more ways on how to kill that fucking clown when it comes back. Eddie physically shivered at the thought of *It* returning, but he ignored the feeling for now.

"So, what movie did you want to watch?" Richie broke him out of his train of thought. Eddie didn't respond, merely gesturing him to the stash of horror movies he kept in his closet. Richie ran his fingers over each of the VHS tapes as he picked one. He read through the selection, *Rosemary's Baby*, *Carrie*, *Evil Dead 2* (Eddie thought the first one sucked), *Lost boys*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, yet Richie stopped looking once his eyes landed on the perfect movie.

Silence of the Lambs.

It was one of his favorites, so he hoped Eddie hadn't seen it yet, he really wanted to know how he would react to the slow-building scares in the movie.

"What about *Silence of the Lambs*?" Richie asked, turning to Eddie with large, begging eyes. He could feel his breath hitch as he looked at him, cause *how could he say no to that face*? Eddie smiled awkwardly.

"S-Sure, we can watch it." Richie looked at him questioningly.

"If it's too scary, we don't have to." He placed one hand on Eddie's shoulder, to which Eddie pushed his hand away.

"No, no, it's fine." Eddie sighed. "I've been meaning to watch it

anyway, I heard it's really good."

And to that, Richie grinned.

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"I ate his liver with some fava beans, and a nice Chianti." The TV blared an iconically creepy quote from *the* Hannibal Lecter himself. Eddie shuddered, wrapping himself deeper into his blanket. Richie looked over at him from the other side of the couch, and pushed the already half-empty bowl of popcorn his way. Eddie shook his head.

"I have a feeling I'm not gonna wanna eat while watching this movie." Richie giggled at this.

"A fair speculation, spaghetti man."

"Ew, okay, don't call me that, dipshit."

"Me?? A dipshit??" Richie pretended to stab himself, overdramatically. "You wound me, Eds." Eddie shoved him in the shoulder lightly, laughing at his ridiculousness. Richie always knew how to make him smile. *God*, he thought, *I am totally screwed*.

"Just watch the movie, Rich."

So he did. The movie stayed pretty tame for the most part, at least in Richie's opinion, until the final meeting between Hannibal Lecter and Clarice ended. The classic horror movie suspense finally kicked in, so Eddie was pushed a little closer to the edge. With a loud blare of the music, he jumped towards the middle of the couch, shielding his eyes from the screen. Richie instinctively moved over to him, wrapping one arm around him, the other in the almost-empty bowl of popcorn, which was mostly kernels at that point.

Eddie's cheeks grew a rosy-pink at the embrace, which he would've cared about if he wasn't so immersed in the final scene of the movie. With one final jump-scare, Eddie practically leaped into Richie's arms, tightly holding onto his waist while his head was pressed into his chest.

Now, Richie blushed, but ignored it while he moved both arms to

tightly hug Eddie, making sure he felt safe in his warm hold. And they stayed like this until the final credits of the movie slid off the screen. Richie knew it was best not to move, since he understood how panicky Eddie could get, and it's not like he was complaining.

Having an adorable, doe-eyed boy snuggling up against him was a situation he didn't expect himself to get into, but a situation he quite enjoyed, especially since it was Eddie. But Eddie eventually pulled back, breaking their cozy hug.

"Sorry..." Eddie mumbled, eyes locked onto the ground.

"Don't be sorry." Richie pleaded. "I should be sorry, I didn't know if the movie was too intense or not." Richie frowned.

"No, it wasn't too intense." Eddie paused. "I... liked it..." He mumbled. Richie apologetically smiled at him. "...the movie wasn't the only thing I liked, though." Eddie spoke under his breath.

"W-What??" Richie blushed, a deep red. Eddie finally realized that he had said that out loud.

They stared at each other for a moment, both wide-eyed with shock at Eddie's sudden confidence.

"I-" Eddie sputtered. "Um... forget I said anything, sorry." He turned to get out of the room, away from the shocked Richie at his side, yet Richie grabbed his arm before he could leave. Eddie looked back at him, his adrenaline from the moment quickly fading.

"You apologize too much." He spoke, warmly smiling. Eddie sat back down beside him, almost completely engulfed in his blanket, trying to hide the growing warmth on his face. Before Eddie could apologize again, because that's what he was best at, Richie pulled him into another warm hug, cupping the back of his head with his large hands. Eddie melted in his arms, because *fuck*, he was a great cuddler. "I-Is this okay?" Doubt started to kick in. "Is this weird? It's probably weird." Richie began to pull away when Eddie tightened his grip on his torso.

"Mm, you're really warm" Eddie mumbled into his chest. Richie

almost died, right there, in the arms of Eddie. *His* Eddie. "Can we just stay like this for a little bit?" Richie nodded in response, turning over so they could both lay comfortably on the couch, Eddie still wrapped up in his little blanket-burrito. And with that, they both drifted off in the warm embrace they shared.

Neither moved, until Richie woke up, blinking his tired eyes. He looked over to the small clock hanging on the wall, over the peeling wallpaper, which read 12:47.

"Fuck." He breathed.

6. Sleep

"Eds, wake up." Richie spoke, while gently shaking the boy cuddled on top of him. "Eddie..." He said that with enough volume to elicit a response, feeling Eddie squirm as he rubbed his eyes awake.

"Mmm..." He was too tired to plan out a full response, so he groaned while gathering up his small blanket to wrap around his body, since it had unraveled as they slept.

"Eds, let's get you upstairs, we shouldn't sleep down here." Richie paused, realizing tomorrow was Wednesday, he sighed. "And I should be getting home."

"NOooo." Eddie huffed, pouting as he still struggled to keep his eyes open. *Oh my god, Richie thought, he is so fucking cute, I'm so screwed.*

"Fine, I'll stay." *It's not like my parents would care anyway*, he thought, but didn't say it out loud. "C'mon." He attempted to lift Eddie by his arms, but he finally regained enough energy to do it himself, so they trudged up the stairs, side by side. Upon reaching Eddie's room, Richie noticed a leather-bound notebook lying on his bedside table. Yet, he pushed away his curiosity for the night, he was *too tired to deal with this shit*. He flopped onto the neatly made bed, disturbing the meticulously placed pillows. Eddie frowned.

"Are you just gonna sleep in your day clothes?" He questioned, Richie nodded. "You can borrow something from me, I have a couple of pajamas that are too baggy on me anyway." Richie scrunched his nose.

"I'm pretty sure they'd be too short to fit over my yeti-sized limbs." Richie snickered.

"Psh, I think you're the perfect height." Richie blushed, Eddie turned away awkwardly. "B-But yeah, maybe they'd be too short."

"It's okay, I'm comfortable enough in these." He smiled, and thought for a moment before speaking again. "So... where am I gonna sleep?" Eddie looked confused. "I know I usually sleep on the bed, with you."

Richie coughed, the idea of them sleeping together, waking up side by side, cuddling until the sun shined in through the old window frame, it all sounded amazing, but maybe neither of them were ready for that. They needed to have a talk first, one which neither of them wanted. "But I could sleep on the floor tonight."

"N-No! Why..." He trailed off while trying to figure out what was going through Richie's mind, *why is today so different?*

"I don't think my heart could handle it..."

Eddie stared up at him, mouth wide open with shock.

Shit, did I say that out loud?

"D-Do you..." Eddie spoke, not wanting to assume things, so he trailed off, avoiding eye-contact with Richie.

"Have a crush on you?" Richie looked down, he couldn't stand looking into his eyes, his adorable loving eyes. "Y-Yeah." He paused. "I'm bi, and the only other person who knows is Stan." He shrugged. "I've liked you for a long time, I just didn't want to bring it up, cause I knew you wouldn't like me back." He coughed awkwardly. Eddie let out a sigh of relief, which confused Richie further.

"OH THANK THE GODS." Eddie yelled, raising his arms in the air.

"What..."

"You are such a fucking idiot." Richie pursed his lips out of resentment. "I like you too, Rich, I can't believe you never knew." Eddie giggled, a warm smile spreading across his face. "I saw the carving you did a while back, on the kissing bridge." He clarified. Richie sat there the entire time, completely shocked and not really understanding the situation. "I carved something under it too."

Richie stayed silent, still bewildered. And then it all clicked.

"Wait, you... like me? Like, like-like me?" Eddie nodded. "For my personality **and** my looks??"

"Yes, I'm just as confused as you are." Eddie snorted.

"Okay, rude." Richie pushed him, to which Eddie pushed back. They kept shoving back at each other, and eventually, Richie managed to knock Eddie back on the bed. He instinctively grabbed onto Richie's shirt, successfully taking him down with him.

So there they sat, Richie hunched over Eddie, pinning him down with his arms as to not squish him. Eddie smiled this shy, cute smile, which drove Richie crazy.

He wanted to kiss him.

So he lowered his face, slowly closing the space between them, eyes set on Eddie's soft, slightly parted lips.

Yet, Eddie turned away.

7. Imperfect

"S-Sorry..." Richie stuttered, pushing himself away from Eddie. "I was moving too fast, wasn't I? I should've asked." He looked down, eyes tired and full of dejection. Eddie inhaled sharply.

"No it's..." He grumbled, rubbing his forehead with his palms. "I-" He groaned. "I-I'm sorry... I need to leave." He spoke, running out the door of his room, a few tears streaking down his face. Richie noticed he was biting his thumb, something he only did when he was upset or anxious.

"Shit..." Richie rubbed his eyes. "I really messed up."

He could hear the bathroom door slam from across the hall. He waited for a moment, before going to knock on the door, checking on Eddie. There was no response at first, so he began to speak.

"Eddie..." No. "I'm really sorry." *Stop it.* "I understand if you want your space, I'll just head home." *Please.* "I-I'll see you tomorrow at school, call me if you need anything."

I'm sorry, Richie.

And with that, Richie turned to leave. The house was quiet, eerily quiet. If it had been any louder, Richie wouldn't have noticed the heavy, fast breathing coming from the bathroom. *Eddie.*

He raced back around, attempting to open the locked door, with no prevail. He sunk onto the floor, leaning up against the wall, he could hear the muffled sobs coming from the other side. It broke his heart to see him this way, which is why he wanted to help.

"Eds, you gotta open the door." He spoke, trying to keep his voice steady. He felt tears well up in his eyes, *I can't let him see me cry*, he wiped them away with the hem of his shirt. "Eddie, please." He whined, trying to keep his throat from caving in. "I know you can make it through this." His tone started to pick up as the words began to flow more naturally. "You are one of the strongest people I know. I mean, you attacked a fucking killer demon clown while covered in

satan barf for christ's sake! But," he paused, smiling, "that's not all. I've seen you grow up. You've been through so much, taken so much shit, yet every time I see you get back on your feet. You're constantly trying to make things better, learn from your mistakes." Eddie was still wheezing, but Richie knew he had to finish his speech, he would try anything in the world if it would mean that Eddie would stop crying. "Not many people could do that. I mean, shit, nobody could do that. Nobody else but you. And I know you're not perfect, Eds, but no one is. All I ask is that you let me help you, and maybe, together, your imperfections won't seem as significant."

Eddie was shocked at his words, yet so was Richie himself. He had been so caught up in making Eddie feel better, he didn't even realize what he was saying, it all just came out.

But it seems they helped, as Eddie was able to open the door, his eyes were red and swollen. He leaned out of the room, and into Richie's arms, sobbing into his shoulder. Richie ran his fingers through his soft, brown hair, gently whispering in his ear as he sobbed, biting his lower lip to dull the sound.

"It's okay, Eddie." His breath felt warm against Eddie's neck, as they were curled up on the hallway floor, gently rocking back and forth. Richie could feel him grip his shirt. Eddie buried his head in the soft fabric. Yet suddenly, their hold was broken when he jerked back to stare Richie in the eyes, desolation and heartache painted on his face, like a melancholy mask.

"Why..." He sniffled. "Why me?"

"What?" Richie placed his hands along Eddie's thighs, which he pushed back, wrapping his arms around himself as a defense.

"Why do you like me..." He trailed off. "When I don't even like me?"

Richie stared at him.

"Eddie..."

"No!" His tone became more exasperated with each breath he took. "I want you to leave." This time, he felt confident in what he was

saying, which made Richie shudder.

"I don't understand, Eds."

"Leave and go find someone else." Richie's breath hitched. "You don't need me, I'll make everything worse I'll..." He sobbed. "I'm not good for you. I'll bring you down with me, just go."

"Ed-"

"GO!" This time he was screaming, his empty cries echoed through the dimly-lit hallway. He couldn't even look at Richie, but he knew this was the best for him, even if it was painful. He expected him to leave without a word, but his assumption soon faltered at the feeling of Richie's familiar arms around him. Before he could object, Richie turned him around so they were facing, before he placed his hands on Eddie's damp cheeks, and pressed their lips together.

Richie's lips were warm and comforting, slightly chapped, as he pushed against Eddie's. He tilted his head to sink into the kiss, moving his hands to cradle Richie's neck, because he couldn't resist. Richie reached up to place his glasses on the top of his head, so he could become closer to Eddie. They felt safe in each other's arms. Richie pulled back to catch his breath.

"I wish you could see yourself like I do." Richie spoke vividly against his lips.

Eddie pulled him closer, cuddling his tall frame, and cried into his shoulder.

"Let's go lie down." Richie softly whispered, taking Eddie gently by the hand and leading him over to his room, where they sunk into the mattress. Richie, still holding onto him, pulled a soft blanket over them, wrapping up Eddie in a warm hug, as he placed a kiss on the top of his head.

And there, they stayed as Eddie cried himself to sleep in Richie's arms.

8. All the Right Things

Eddie's alarm blared through the dark room. He squirmed underneath his blanket as he moved over to turn it off, trying not to disturb Richie too much. He sat on the edge of the bed, shivering at the lack of warmth, as he turned off his alarm. He could feel the sheet of the bed dip as Richie shifted his weight.

"Eddie?" He asked, rubbing his tired eyes. Eddie sighed, and moved over to hug him again.

"We gotta get up." He grumbled.

"No!" Richie yelped as he pulled Eddie back down on the bed. Eddie giggled. "You deserve a day off."

"Rich, c'mon."

"Nope, you're staying home today." Eddie rolled his eyes. "Now get back in bed and go to sleep."

"Richie..."

"Nope!" And with that, he pulled Eddie into a tight embrace, covering him back up with the blanket as he did.

Eddie was aware of every small feeling Richie caused. Their legs were intertwined, meeting at their thighs as Richie spooned him in bed. His back was pressed into Richie's chest, his chin meeting at the curve of his shoulder. Their hands stayed interlocked, Richie's much larger than Eddie's. Richie sleepily placed small kisses along his neck, causing him to shiver under the embrace. He felt happy, and comfortable, something he hadn't felt in a while. And although it took him a while to fall asleep, he didn't mind it at all.

And before he knew it, it was already noon, the sun shining through the windows in soft hazy streaks of light. Eddie felt the lack of heat and weight on the bed, noticing that Richie was gone. Dread filled his mind.

Did he leave? Does he hate me? What if he stops being friends with me?

He was pulled out of his thoughts, though, when he heard a gentle knock come from the open door frame.

"Morning." Richie smiled softly, his hair a messy pile on his head.

"H-Hey." Eddie smiled back, taking a deep breath to calm his nerves. His mind flashed back to the events of last night; the confession, the panic attack, the crying. He tensed at the thought. "Hey, I'm really sorry about last night." His eyes were lined with tears. "I-I don't know what happened, I-" Richie moved to sit next to him on the bed, wrapping an arm around him.

"H-Hey, it's okay."

"No, It's-"

"Hey." Richie's voice was stern, as he held on to Eddie's shoulders and looked him straight in the eye. "Do not be sorry. Never apologize for how you feel."

Eddie melted into Richie's arms, tearing up a bit at the adoration. He sniffled a little bit, gripping onto Richie's shirt, burying his face in the fabric. It smelled familiar and safe, just like Richie.

"Thank you..."

"Eds, I care about you, okay? I really meant it when I said you should call me when you start feeling this way. I don't want anything bad to happen to you."

Now Eddie started full-on crying (again). For once, it wasn't out of sadness, but out of the care and support that Richie was giving him. It made him happy for the first time in a while. Richie became a little concerned.

"D-Did I say something wrong?" Richie stuttered.

"No." Eddie smiled as tears gently slide down his face. "You said all the right things. Thank you, Richie."

In response, Richie simply kissed Eddie on the cheek.

-

They eventually finished eating breakfast (or lunch, I should say) and cleaned up the kitchen, because Richie was an awful cook. *It's the thought that counts, right?* They simply relaxed on the couch once they were done, hands interlocked, and took in the quiet afternoon sun.

"What now?" Eddie asked, tracing his thumb along Richie's knuckles.

"Hm..." Richie's eyes widened. "Actually, I have an idea." He leaped off the couch, leaving Eddie alone and cold. "Stay here." Eddie simply nodded, confused.

He sat there on the couch, while he could hear Richie messing around upstairs. Muffled footsteps grew closer as Richie made his way down the stairs.

"Ready?" He asked, clutching his backpack over his shoulders.

"Sure..." Eddie raised one eyebrow. "Wait, lemme grab something real quick." Eddie raced past Richie, up the stairs, and returned with the leather-bound notebook that Richie had noticed was on his nightstand. "Okay, let's go."

"After you, m'lady." Richie said, while opening the door and bowing.

"Don't make me smack you." Eddie glared at him, still smiling though. He walked past Richie, out the door, clutching his notebook to his chest. As Richie walked after him, he couldn't stop smiling, taking in the time they had together.

"Follow me."

9. Allergies...

Richie and Eddie walked for what felt like forever, brushing shoulders every now and then which made Richie's spine tingle. They laughed along with the afternoon sun. Plants grew in the cracks between the worn concrete, brushing against their shoes as they walked past. Eddie couldn't stop smiling, looking up at the sky. He was just so happy. Happy happy happy. God, even the sound of it made him smile more. Richie just looked at him, one eyebrow raised.

"Hellooo" He waved a hand in front of Eddie's face. "Anyone home?" Eddie pushed his hand down, grunting along with the movement.

"Sorry, I was just lost in thought." He smiled at Richie. "I'm listening, now."

"What were you thinking about?" Richie's shoes scuffed the pavement as he walked. "Me, I hope." He winked at Eddie.

Eddie scoffed. "Just thinking about ur mom lol."

"Touché, Kaspbrak, touché."

"So where are we going anyway?"

"Somewhere nice." He smiled at Eddie, grabbing a hold of his hand so their interlocked fingers fell right between them. Gently, he nudged his shoulder into Eddie's. The feeling of his bare skin against Richie's sent shivers along his spine. And they both radiated bliss, approaching the kissing bridge without anyone around (thank GOD). Eddie raised one eyebrow, looking at Richie questioningly, just before he helped Eddie over the fence and into the woods.

"You didn't take me here to make out with me..." Eddie frowned. "Did you?" Richie placed a sweatshirt over Eddie's shoulders, knowing he would feel more comfortable since they were out surrounded by nature (aka a germs playground, which is what Eddie would call it).

"No, just c'mon" Richie chirped, pulling Eddie along with him.

They wandered through the forest, weaving between old trees. Eddie

let out a sigh, relieved he wore boots that day instead of his sneakers, since they were trudging through the damp dirt and leaves. The bark was peeling off the trees, falling on the ground and being kicked around as they walked by. The wind rattled the branches, letting dustings of pollen drift through the air. Eddie sneezed. *Allergies...*

"Here we are." Richie spoke, smiling gently as he reached out his free arm to show off the view.

The sun was tall in the sky, reflecting off the shallow, light blue river, sending sharp rays of light into Eddie's eyes. The tree framed the riverbank just so there was enough room to lay down, which prompted Richie to spread out a small blanket on one of the large, flat rocks that were perfect to fit the two of them. The leaves flowed down, landing gently in the water, causing ripples as they flowed along with the current. It was quiet, except for the sound of the white water and rustling of the trees, making Eddie sigh, taking in the calming view. And he would've just stood there, if Richie hadn't tugged on his arm, motioning him to sit with him.

"How... did you find this place?" Eddie asked, gently leaning down to spread his legs out on the blanket, ignoring his widespread gaze, eyes locked on the water. Richie sighed, leaning onto his arms, propping him upward as he stared at the view.

"I was out wandering one night, and I just found it." He looked over at Eddie, not possibly able to contain his grin. "One day I'll show you what this place looks like at night, but I hope this'll work for now." And Eddie couldn't help but grin back at him, just before he softly placed his head on Richie's shoulder, clutching the borrowed sweatshirt over his frame. He whispered out a small "thank you" but Richie wasn't necessarily sure if he was supposed to hear that. "Anyway, I didn't just bring you here to look at the river." Eddie blinked at him, raising his head. "Here." Richie handed him a small, hardcover book, woven on fabric and leather.

The Phantom Tollbooth.

"You-" Eddie gasped, Richie chuckled and ruffled his hair in response, his grin unmoving and genuine.

"I remember you talking about how The Phantom Tollbooth was your favorite book as a kid, and I knew how sad you were when you lost it. I remember seeing all the small doodles on the edges of the pages, and how happy it made you." Eddie's eyes became watery. "I thought that you might want a new copy, and maybe you could read it to me sometime." He chuckled. "I don't know if that's super childish or not, but it still might be fun, who knows." He shrugged.

And tears started dripping from Eddie's eyes.

"Aw shit, Eds." He placed his hands on Eddie's shoulders. "I didn't mean to make you cry... again." Eddie clutched the book to his chest.

"Thank you, Richie." He giggled, smiling shyly at him, looking into his eyes. The scene felt cliché and sappy, but it was unlike anything they had ever experienced or felt, like a feather-soft rope pulling them closer, to what they had no clue, but they knew it was good.

And Eddie placed a small, chaste kiss onto Richie's lips, spreading heat through both of them. "Thank you..." Eddie whispered again, against Richie's lips, before pulling back, shyly biting his lip and tugging a small piece of hair behind his ear. He looked... angelic to Richie, color spreading across his freckled face.

"Oh god..." Richie covered his cheek with his hands, feeling the warmth against his cool fingers.

"W-What? Too much?" Eddie sputtered.

"N-No." Richie peered up at him. Eddie noticed the color on his cheeks. "Do it again?" He smiled awkwardly.

And so he did, and it was fast, and sweet and everything they didn't know they needed, but now desperately did.

10. Beautiful Boy

Eddie was leaning into Richie's arm, which was wrapped around his shoulders, along with the extra blanket they shared. The weather was strangely brisk for September, but it was all the more reason to stay close together. Eddie was promptly flipping through the book, smiling at the illustrations and the memories they gave him.

"I can't even believe this is you right now." Eddie snorted, Richie looked at him questioningly. "I mean... when you're with other people, you're constantly making jokes, or talking about your dick size." Richie cringed. "But when you're with me..." He sighed. "You're just you. Richie. Effin. Tozier." Richie snickered, pulling Eddie closer. "I like seeing this side of you."

"Or, maybe you just like getting free stuff." Richie smirked, while gently nudged in the shoulder.

"Shut up..." Eddie mumbled, but he kept smiling, as did Richie. Rich thought back to the events of yesterday, last night, every single small moment that led them there. It seemed insane, everything moved so fast, yet so excruciatingly long, and he didn't know what to think of it, but he didn't mind. He didn't mind at all.

Looking back on everything, he remembered the notebook from Eddie's nightstand, the same one he brought along with him, and he finally let go of his underlying curiosity.

"I've been wanting to ask..." He looked to the side. "What's the notebook that you brought with you? It seems important." He shrugged.

"It's uhh..." Eddie looked to the side. "It's a sketchbook." He held his arms in his hands.

"What? I didn't know you could draw, Eds." He placed a kiss on the top of Eddie's head, eliciting a small nod.

"Well, I can't, but I do it anyway." He shrugged.

"I'll be the judge of that." Richie smirked. "Can I look through it?" Eddie's breath hitched for a moment, before he calmed down.

"Yeah, go ahead." He grunted. "It's not like you're gonna find anything interesting in there, anyway." Richie huffed. He gently grabbed the sketchbook out of Eddie's hands, taking in the comforting smell and feel of the worn leather. He slowly opened the cover and began flipping through the pages, seeing cute cartoon drawings, and incredibly fluid semi-realistic ones. They were sketchy, and soft, and full of movement and personality. And they were fantastic.

"Eddie, holy shit." Eddie flinched at the sudden noise, looking back at Richie, startled and clearly anxious. Richie kept looking between the beautiful drawings and the beautiful boy, eyes wide and full of amazement. "These are fantastic." He smiled, looking directly into Eddie's eyes. "And I genuinely mean it, they're really good. Like..." He scrunched his hands, making demon-spawn noises as he tried to figure out what to say next. "I don't even know how to describe them!" He stood up, raising his voice, Eddie snorted. "They're so unique a-and beautiful..." He paused, looking back down at Eddie and lowering his voice. "They're so you." He smiled.

"Th-" Eddie struggled to get his words out. "Thank you."

"So tell me how."

"What?" Eddie stared at him blankly.

"Tell me how you learned to draw, and don't leave out any details!" He smiled.

And Eddie smiled back.

-

It was the late afternoon, and it had just dawned on Eddie that he skipped school to waste the entire day in the middle of the woods. Well, waste isn't exactly the right word, but it's the word Eddie's mom would've used. She would've been furious if she were there. *If*.

Yet the day had been well spent, Eddie finally got to talk to someone about art, and Richie would eagerly listen, asking questions here and

there without being too intrusive. It was incredibly out of character for both of them, or maybe it was incredibly in-character, and they had just been acting weirdly all the time before. Every now and then, Eddie would sneeze softly and high pitched, which Richie would smirk at because Eddie legitimately sounded like a fairy. It was *cute cute cute...*

Eventually, they had to pack up, though. Richie gathered up the blankets, not caring enough to fold them, and stuffed them in his backpack, before grabbing a hold of Eddie's hand again and walking back through the forest. The sun cast the shadows of the leaves onto the ground, shifting and swaying with the wind. It wasn't long before they reached the kissing bridge, and managed to hurl themselves over the fence to reach town. It was quiet. *Eerily quiet.*

"Hey, fucknuts." A sneer emerged from the darkness of the bridge. *Bowers...* Richie could feel Eddie start to shake, moving his hand into his pocket to take out his almost-empty inhaler. Henry kicked it out of his hand, moving forward to show his gang behind him. You could see his teeth as he smirked. *Oh fuck.*

Vic and Belch attentively followed Henry's signal, and each took one of Eddie's arms to hold him in place, moving him away, separating him from Richie. Both of Richie's arms were pinned behind his back by Patrick, snickering as Henry moved closer.

"Enjoy your date?" He gritted his teeth. "I'm sure ya did, penis breath." Henry spat. Richie chuckled, eliciting a groan from Eddie. "You think that's funny, fag? Well, you won't be laughing when my knife hits your throat." Henry flicked out the blade, tracing along Richie's jaw, leaving red marks along his neck.

"Kinky." Richie laughed, being silenced by a solid punch to the cheek. He groaned, leaning his head back. The gang chuckled.

"So you admit it, huh? You really are a faggot." Henry picked up Richie's glasses, and ripped off the stems before throwing them to the ground and stomping on them. Richie reached out, but was only met with a tightened grip from Patrick on his arms. His shoulder blades were digging into each other, his skin burned. His face got hotter, eyebrows furrowing, before taking a deep breath and smiling.

"I don't know, man. You're pretty invested in my love-life, sounds gay to me." He was silenced with another punch, same cheek, but this time he could taste the blood in his mouth. Eddie yelped, trying to break the hold on him, with no success.

"I. Am not. Gay. I'm not a faggot-freak like you." He held the blade just underneath Richie's eye, slowly digging it into the skin without bloodshed. Richie winced. "Now I'm gonna have to teach you a lesson with your little fuck-buddy watchin'."

Patrick held out Richie's exposed arm, holding him tightly in place. Then, Henry's knife hit his skin. Sharp pain flowed through his arm, he inhaled sharply between grunts of torment. With each stroke, his arm tensed, pulling back against the restraints on him. Eddie fought to run to him, but couldn't move. He screamed and pulled and did whatever he could.

"Richie! Please... stop-" Tears formed in his eyes. Yet Eddie's screams would amount to nothing, the blade kept digging into his skin, releasing pools of blood that dripped onto the ground. Over and over and over. Eddie cries continued, before he was elbowed in the face by Vic to shut him up. He moaned in pain. But the pain in him only grew anger.

Over the sound of Richie's yelling, he bit Vic's shoulder, hard, freeing one of his arms, which he used to punch Belch in the gut. Both of the boys pulled back, being met with an elbow to the face and a kick to the groin. Richie would've cheered him on, if it wasn't for the pain in his other arm, where Henry had moved to carve something else in his skin. He cringed with each stroke of the blade. Eddie now moved to Henry, biting him in the upper back, noticing deep bloody teeth marks.

"What the fuck, twink?" Henry back-hand slapped Eddie, pushing him away from Richie, pinning him back and moving his blade in front of his throat. Yet the fear in Eddie's eye was soon overcome as police sirens blared. The sheriff's car was making its way up the bridge. Henry's shocked face looked back between the impending car, and Eddie's face, before finally making the rushed decision to call off his gang. They scattered off together, beginning to hop over the fence. Henry was the last one.

"Enjoy your date, freaks."

And with that, he ran off.

11. Distraction

"Well fuck." Richie limped over to Eddie pulling him into a hug. "That was amazing and terrifying."

"Amazing?" Eddie jolted back. "You could've been killed, asshole!" As he pulled back he noticed the blood on Richie's arms. "Holy shit..." He looked up at Richie, noticing his busted lip and bruised cheek, along with the red marks on his neck.

"I'm okay, Eds." He pleaded.

"No..." Eddie sniffled. "Let's go back to my house, I can take care of you there." Richie nodded. He took one of Richie's hands, holding it gently as to not hurt him, leading him back to where they began, because Richie could barely see. Walking through the streets, they got weird looks and subtle gasps, most of which ended in the conclusion of "Bowers..."

They eventually reached his house, Eddie fumbled with the key trying to get the door unlocked, you could tell he was frantic. He roughly pushed open the door, flinching as it slammed into the wall. He yanked Richie inside, this time gently closing the door behind them, as they walked upstairs to the bathroom. Richie smiled regardless of the pain, he liked how Eddie worried about him, how he cared. He **really** liked it.

Fuck.

He loved it. He loved Eddie. He's loved Eddie for years, but never realized it until that very moment, as he was being pulled down the hallway. He wasn't gonna tell him, not right then at least, then, he was about to be cleaned up, by the boy he loved, and he just wanted to enjoy the moment.

"Here, sit up on the sink." Eddie spoke, breaking the silence as he creaked open the bathroom cupboard, sifting through half-empty pill bottles and unraveled gauze. Richie followed his order, hopping on to the counter, swinging his legs back and forth as Eddie searched for the right supplies. He pulled out some disinfectant, gauze, medical

tape, along with a few other things. He placed a gauze pad along each of Richie's arms. "Hold these down, **firmly**." He accentuated that last word. Richie complied.

Eddie finally calmed down a little, after neatly placing the medical supplies next to Richie on the counter. He sighed, leaning forward on his arms to look in the mirror. *Jesus...* he thought, staring at the dark circles beneath his eyes. Richie hummed, tilting his head.

"What?" Eddie asked, moving to stand in front of Richie's knees, arms tightly crossed. Richie smirked.

"You just look stressed, Eds." He paused. "And tired."

"Yeah, well it's hard when you skip school against your will and your boyfriend gets his ass kicked." He grumbled.

"B-Boyfriend?" Richie's eyes were wide.

"BEST FRIEND. I mean best friend." He coughed, face hot and flushed. Richie just smiled, letting a small breath escape from his lips.

"Do you want to be boyfriends?" He sighed. Eddie thought for a moment, which made Richie's spine twinge, but he wouldn't let it show.

"As much as I'd like to, Rich..." Richie shuddered. "Look at what happened." He pointed to Richie's bruises. "If we were together, like really together, everything would only get worse." He shrugged. "And I don't want you to get hurt because of me." Richie swallowed harshly.

"But... I wanna be with you." He snorted. "God, I sound so cliché right now... but I do, I really wanna be with you." Richie had to fight the urge to reach out for Eddie's hand, trying to keep pressure on the gauze pads lining his arms.

"I wanna be with you too." Eddie smiled, pecking the side of Richie's face with a kiss, small and subtle.

"Then..." He paused. "Why don't we just keep it a secret?"

"Actually... that's not a bad idea. But we wouldn't tell anyone? Not even the losers?"

"Maybe not to start, but if it still goes well we could tell them later?" He shrugged. "It was just a thought, anyway."

"No, I think it's good." He looked down, smiling shyly. "Now I can really call you my boyfriend."

Boyfriend.

Richie's heart ached at the word, it felt so right. The pleasant stinging in his chest and the warmth on his cheeks was unlike anything he'd ever felt before, and it was all because of Eddie. His Eddie. The Eddie that was way too good for him. He didn't deserve this, he didn't deserve any of it. His stomach churned.

"Uhm..." Eddie coughed. "I think the bleeding has stopped by now, you can lift up your hands." So Richie did, revealing a bloodstained mess. Words were carved into his arms, but it was too stained to see. "Shit, Rich." Eddie turned on the faucet, taking one of Richie's arms, running it under the warm water. Richie flinched as he lathered on soap to his wound, causing a small stinging sensation. "What-

Eddie rinsed off the blood and soap to see "faggot" carved into Richie's skin, in deep strokes that were sure to scar.

"Shit..." Richie muttered seeing the words, holding his arm up closer to his face. Eddie washed his other arm, "twink" embedded into his wrist. And what Eddie noticed, were the scars behind those, much older, but he wouldn't bring that up right now. "Oh god... what am I gonna do?" Richie stuttered. "If m-my parents see this..." He shivered. "I don't even want to think about what they'd do."

"What do you mean?"

And Richie didn't answer, he couldn't. The force squeezing at his shoulders made him flinch. He squeezed his eyes shut, pushing out foggy tears to line his face.

"Rich, answer me."

This time, Eddie was stern. Not in a panicked way though, he was strangely calm as he began to rub circles in the fabric of Richie's shirt with his thumb.

"I-I" Richie's voice cracked. "They don't know. Only you and Stan. And if they'd find out-" He gulped. "They would probably kick me out, o-or hit me, o-or worse." His speech got faster as he stammered out the words. Eddie simply pulled him into a hug.

"How long?"

"What?" Richie stuttered, still holding on to Eddie.

"How long have they been like this?" Eddie breathed against his neck, warm and soft. Richie grumbled.

"I think... since forever." He swallowed. "They would never hit my face, though. And most of the time I could convince people it was Bowers or something..."

Eddie sniffled against his shoulder, holding on tighter, kissing Richie on the neck.

"I'm sorry..." He sniffled again. He pulled back with lidded eyes, face flushed red, a stark contrast against his golden-brown face and deep brown eyes. He kissed Richie's neck again. "I could distract you..."

Richie almost died, right then and there. Eddie's breath was hot and uneven, nose brushing against Richie's neck as he placed soft kisses along his jawline. Richie's lip was trembling.

"E-Eddie..."

Eddie began to suck and nip at the skin just below Richie's ear, his hand moving up to cup his face, gently stroking his cheekbones under his fingers. Richie bit the middle of his bottom lip to muffle his heavy breathing. He widened the distance between his legs to allow Eddie to move in closer, pressing their chests together in a warm embrace. He moved his lips lower down, leaving a trail of sloppy kisses as he gently nipped at his collar bone.

"Eds..."

"Hmm" He hummed against his collar.

"Eddie, stop." Eddie pulled back, biting his cheek. His lips were red and plush.

"Why?" He grumbled. "I just want you to feel better." His fingers brush against his neck, making Richie shiver.

"As much as I really like this..." He palmed his forehead, heat soaking into his hand. "I don't think it's the best thing to do right now. Repressing my issues with kissing, as great as it feels, isn't healthy. And I still have an open wound that needs to be taken care of."

"R-Right." Eddie huffed. "Sorry..."

"Hey," He placed a heavy hand on Eddie's cheek, tilting his head to face Richie's. "You did nothing wrong, don't apologize." He smiled.

"Sor-"

He was interrupted by a soft finger on his lips.

"We gotta work on that."

"Y-Yeah." He giggled.

"Now, help me deal with this." He pointed to the marks on his arms. "I literally have no idea how to take of wounds."

"Here." Eddie gently grabbed his wrist. "I'll show you."

12. Richie-Effin-Tozier

Eddie softly moved his hands along the edges of the cuts, noticing Richie wince under the light pressure. He picked up a bottle of disinfectant from the arsenal of medical supplies, shaking it to check if there was still some left. He looked up at Richie.

"This is gonna sting." Eddie spoke.

"Yeah, I know."

"A lot." He was more stern this time.

"Okay..." Richie felt uneasy, but expected the pain to be manageable. Eddie removed the cap of the bottle, throwing it aside even though it would be hard to find later in all of the clutter. Then he, slowly, dripped the liquid onto Richie's wounds over the sink.

"FUCK" Richie yelped under the sting in his arms. He tried to pull away but Eddie had a firm grip on his wrist as he poured more onto his arms. "Shit... you weren't lying, Eddie Spaghetti."

"Don't call me that." Eddie grumbled, letting the disinfectant soak in before he rinsed it off at began to bandage up the wounds. He placed soft gauze pads on both arms, and wrapped up both to keep it in place. He made sure to secure the ends by tucking it in, so while he was busy he didn't notice the half-blind smitten boy gleaming down at him with a warm smile on his lips. "What?" Eddie snapped.

"You're so beautiful."

What?

"What the fuck, Richard?"

"Well, you are." He grinned, and Eddie noticed his face in the mirror, tomato red. He buried his face in his hands.

"Ugh..."

"What? You don't like it when I compliment you?" He smiled and

raised his eyebrows, leaning back on his newly-bandaged arms. "Because if I didn't, that would be a hate crime."

"How the fuck did you get so suave all of the sudden?" Eddie mumbled, biting his lip.

"I'm just doin' my job." He placed one hand on Eddie's warm cheek, the other holding onto Eddie's wrist. "You're beautiful."

Eddie retracted into his shirt, covering his face in the fabric, his hand tangling into his hair. "Shut up..." His voice was muffled through his shirt.

"Never!" Richie grinned. "I will never stop telling you how beautifully gorgeous and amazing you are. I'm not gonna stop until you start believing it yourself." He caressed Eddie's wrist with his thumb, gliding over his cute little birthmarks.

"Who even are you?" Eddie pulled his face out of his shirt. "Like, is Richie in there?" He couldn't stop smiling, he hadn't been complimented like this in a while. Let me rephrase that, he hadn't be complimented like this *ever*.

"Just like you said earlier." Richie couldn't help but smile harder back. "I'm Richie-Effin-Tozier."

"Well, seems like Richie-Effin-Tozier is a lot of bark and no bite."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Richie asked while Eddie moved closer to him.

"I mean, if he really thinks I'm 'all that' then maybe he should make a move." Eddie glided his fingers over Richie's lips, grinning at the blush on his cheeks. *Oh my fucking god, how am I even saying this?* Eddie frantically thought, his mind was racing.

"Wow." Richie grabbed Eddie by the waist, pulling him flush against the bathroom counter, so his hips met just between Richie's legs. "Mr. Spaghetti's feeling pretty bold today, now aren't we?" Eddie rolled his eyes at the nickname.

"Well, one of us has to."

"Hey! What happened to Richie-Effin-Tozier??"

"*Oh my god.*" He whined, rolling his eyesight again. "Just shut up and kiss me."

Richie didn't need to be told twice.

They smashed their lips together, Richie tilting his head to move in closer. Eddie's lips were soft, they felt like velvet against Richie's, just the thought of them made him melt. Eddie tasted like mint and strawberries, while Richie tasted like cigarettes and chocolate, it was a flavor combination neither expected, but couldn't live without. Every touch between them felt urgent and kind, each longing breath spoke feelings that they hid for years. It was all they wanted and more.

They pulled back, gazing at each other. The stillness of the room made Eddie's spine tingle. He looked at Richie's face, counting the freckles on his nose, each one chocolate-colored and cute. Richie's hair was messily tousled back, showing off his forehead. His eyes were a deep brown, gleaming in the dim light, gazing back at Eddie. His hands were gently wrapped around Eddie's frame, squeezing the light fabric between his fingers. It all felt too good to be true.

Richie pulled him close as he stepped down from the sink, placing both feet on the floor. He rested his chin on Eddie's head, cupping the back of his neck, running his fingers through the soft brown hair. Eddie hummed in response. He nuzzled his face into Richie's chest, gripping at the fabric of his shirt on his back. Richie's free hand was placed on Eddie's hip, caressing the soft skin underneath his shirt. His hands were cold, but Eddie weakened under the feeling.

"Hey..." Richie pulled back, something resting just on his tongue. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure." Eddie spoke calmly, but his temperature was rising.

Richie paused.

"Where's your mom?"

And that was the exact question Eddie feared.

13. Married

"I-I..." Eddie sputtered out his words, if you could even call them words. He was shaking, Richie could feel it under his grip. Eddie's breathing quickened, he'd seen this all before. "Sh-She..." Richie squeezed his shoulders. "She left me..." He finally managed to form a sentence.

"What?" It was Richie's turn to question.

"She left... she's not coming back." He looked down.

"E-Eddie..." He pulled him close, feeling Eddie's tears soak into his shoulder.

"She... She found out who I am... She abandoned me..." Eddie stumbled out between hiccups and gasps, fully pressing his face into Richie's neck.

"Who you are?"

"Gay." He spat. "A faggot, loser, geeky little freak." Venom flowed in his words. "A fucking disappointment." He felt sure of what he was saying. Richie's heart panged, playing a solemn melody. He pulled them apart so they were face-to-tear-soaked-face. His hands played along Eddie's shoulders, gliding over the soft fabric.

"You are gay." Eddie rolled his eyes. "But, you are not a freak. At least not to me." He bit his lip, trying to fight back the words he knew he would inevitably say. "Freak, or not..." He choked. "I love you." He could feel the tears sliding down his face as well. Eddie urgently cuddled into his chest.

"You don't know how long I've wanted to hear you say that..." He gasped between words, choking back his tears. "I love you too." They were both fully crying, something that they had done a lot of over the past few days. "I've loved you for so fucking long... it hurts sometimes. And now I can finally call your trash-mouth mine." He snickered through the tears, smiling and sniffing. "God... I'm so happy."

"I love you." Richie huffed in a whisper.

"I know."

"I love you." He got louder.

"What are you-"

"I LOVE YOU" He yelled. Eddie grinned.

"I LOVE YOU TOO" They let go of each other, racing down the hall to Eddie's room, faces drying in the breeze. They popped open his large window, and filed through onto the roof. They smiled at each other, knowing what was about to happen.

"I LOVE EDDIE KASPBRAK!" He screamed, cupping his hands to file the noise, closing his eyes. Eddie chipped in.

"I LOVE RICHIE TOZIER!"

Their grins were electric. Nothing could touch them. Every homophobic comment, every passing glance, passing judgment, it all faded away in the moment. All their phobias faded away.

They moved close to each other again, wrapping their arms so it was a tangled mess of delirium. Richie's curls dangled in front of his face, hiding his dark eyes that met Eddie's. They shared a gentle kiss, before intertwining their hands and returning inside. Eddie leaned into his shoulder, connecting their bare skin, spreading warmth between each other. They nuzzled into the sheet's of Eddie's pristine bed, Richie taking in the comforting smell between the detergent and Eddie's fruity shampoo.

"Hey, Eds?"

"Yeah?"

"What now?"

Eddie paused, he didn't know the answer himself. What would happen now that Richie knew he was on his own? He couldn't live at the Tozier's, their dynamic was bad enough. His breath was hot and

heavy against Richie's chest, it was all overwhelming yet somehow okay. Nothing and everything made sense.

"I... don't know." He spoke honestly, it was better they not lie to each other.

"What if..." Richie trailed off, the idea seeming absurd. "Nah, nevermind."

"What?" Eddie pulled back, propping himself on his arm.

"What if I stayed here?" His words came out before his brain could catch up. *It was stupid... right?*

"Wha-"

"I-I mean..." Richie interrupted. "That way I could avoid my shit parents, and you wouldn't be alone. Maybe it would work?" He shrugged.

"I..." Eddie blinked, thoughts racing through his head. "Actually, yeah... I like it." He snickered. "It's like we're married or something."

"One day It'll be real." Richie spoke.

And Eddie blushed.

-

Richie wanted to get out of his "house" as soon as possible and get back to Eddie's. He had snuck in through the back door as to not disturb his parents, dragging Eddie along by the hand quietly. His parents were huddled in the living room, various bottles in hand, small babble moving about them. He was thankful the stairs were hidden, or else they would have noticed the small squeaks and squeals from the floorboards. Eddie's wrist in hand, Richie climbed up the stairs to his room.

It was quite small and completely unorganized, laundry and books lay scattered across the bed, a sign it hadn't been used in a while. Open notebooks were askew on the bookshelf, next to numerous figures and loose papers. Richie shuffled over to his closet, grabbing a

large duffel bag and filling it with underwear and socks, before moving to his bed and grabbing handfuls of shirts and pants.

"Don't forget books n' stuff, I have plenty of room in my closet."

"Mm." He nodded, swiftly moving to pick up his favorite novels, and a couple of poetry books, not excluding his notebook full of his own poetry. He snatched a fistful of loose papers along with a couple of pencils.

"Toothbrush?"

"Yep, just a sec." He stashed a tan Polaroid SX-70 in the outside of the bag. He zipped it up, leaving a little room at the top, before jogging towards the doorframe. He was about to head to the bathroom, when something blocked his path.

"Richard."

He gulped.

14. Giddy

"H-Hey, mom." Richie stared up at the tall, slender woman in front of him with fearful eyes.

"What are you doing?" She grumbled, quick to ask, while she moved her eyes back and forth between him and Eddie. Richie wasn't sure of what to say, so he blurted out the first thing that came into his head.

"I-I'm just packing up a bag to sleep over at Eddie's house." He pointed to the anxious boy behind him. She leered in response, scoffing as she moved closer to Richie.

"You were away the last few nights, you are staying home today." She gripped his shoulder, nails digging into his pale, freckled skin. "Put your things back and tell Eddie to leave." She sneered.

"B-But." Richie knew this was going to happen, whether she liked it or not, it was just a matter of how unscathed he would make it out.

"Now." Her hold was so hard, it left marks along the curve of his shoulder, which would fade to bruises in time.

"No." His eyes were teary, staring into his mother's. She reared her yellow, stained teeth in a low growl.

"What. Did. You. Say?" Her neck cracked as she tilted her head. Her eyes were still, not even moving to blink.

"I SAID, NO."

He shoved back at her, causing her to stumble in the doorframe, before regaining her balance and returning to Richie. She slapped him across the cheek with an angry scowl erupting from her taut lips. Richie yelped as he placed one hand on the reddened area. He huffed.

"Fuck you." Richie barked.

Her ears twitched. She stared at him with utter disdain, it flowed through her expressions. Richie felt a tear drop onto his hand. He

knew what was going to happen. She raced towards him, shrieking behind clenched fists, and Richie tightly closed his eyes waiting for the hit that never came.

He heard a large thud in front of him. Opening his eyes, his mother was slack against the wall, eyes closed and mollified. Eddie stood to the side, huffing with adrenaline as he set down the heavy book he used to knock her out. Richie gaped at him, at the red-faced, completely overwhelmed boy in front of him. Their eyes met for a moment, but were alerted by the stirring downstairs. They needed to leave, *now*.

In one hand, Richie grabbed the bag he had dropped beside him and slung over his shoulder. In the other hand, he grabbed onto Eddie and pulled him along, racing towards the back door. If they were fast enough, they could make it.

Turning the corner of the stairs and skidding through the back door, he could hear shouts of protest coming from the room beside him, but didn't spare a glance back. They slid down the driveway, only to realize that Richie's father was chasing after them.

"Shit-" Richie mumbled, thinking for a second before hurriedly grabbing his bike, not thinking to bring his helmet. "Get on." Richie frantically motioned for Eddie to sit on the handle bars, he was reluctant but grumbly complied.

They raced past the streets and houses, feeling the sunset breeze flow through their wheels. Eddie was anxiously mumbling something under his breath while Richie picked up speed, ignoring the shouts which were a block away by now. The wheels glided over the pavement, moving over the small cracks which had leafy plants growing.

It wasn't long before they made it to Eddie's house. One porch light was on, while the other flickered with the rhythm of the wind. They both breathed heavily as the adrenaline wore off. Eddie tentatively wrapped his arms around Richie.

"That was terrifying." He spoke out while Richie returned the hug.

"Yeah..." He smelled Eddie's body wash, a relaxing vanilla. "But we're okay now, that's what matters." He pulled away, smiling down at Eddie.

"Mm..." Eddie really wanted to kiss him, but they were outside, and he would rather not deal with any more drama today. He grabbed Richie's bag, while Richie slowly followed him back into the house. Eddie's room was warm and inviting, something Richie never felt at home, but now he didn't have to, this was his home now. The idea made him giddy.

"Woof, I'm really sweaty." He fanned his shirt while plopping onto Eddie's bed. *Their* bed.

"Wow, thank you so much for getting your sweat all over the bed." Eddie grumbled. Richie raised one eyebrow, grinning maniacally. It was at this moment Eddie knew, he fucked up. "Oh, fuck..."

Richie yanked him down onto the bed, snuggling into him, rubbing his sweaty forehead across his chest and shoulders. Eddie yelped but couldn't break out of the hold. When Richie pulled away, he got a light smack on the head.

"Fuck you, Richie."

"Please?"

He got another smack.

"Great, now I feel disgusting." He tugged at the sweat-covered shirt. "If I don't shower, I'm gonna go crazy." He began to walk towards the door.

"Not if I do first!"

Richie raced past the door, past Eddie, and slammed the bathroom door behind him. Eddie could hear the soft chuckle from the other side. He rolled his eyes, a soft *fuck you* on his grinning lips. Disgusted by the sweat, he changed his polo shirt into a baggy tee. He heard the water trickle through the pipes as Richie showered, the sound a soothing white-noise.

He decided to unpack some of the stuff Richie brought, and place it into his closet. He hung numerous shirts, folded pants, and placed his poetry books on his shelves. *He has a lot more poetry than I expected*, Eddie quietly thought to himself, fingers brushing over the book spines. He made sure, specifically, to leave Richie's notebook out on his desk, he knew he might want it later. Richie would constantly write in that notebook during school. *What was in it?*

He hesitantly flipped open the cover, it was fabric-bound, covered in sketchy pen doodles that had appeared over the years. A clean, cursive "Richard M. Tozier" was printed on the first page. He flipped to the second, seeing a short-few lines of writing on the lined paper.

"There was no denying that he loved the rain.

Sometimes it felt as though it was the only thing keeping him from going absolutely mad.

When he would cry himself to sleep, the rain would cry with him, and would wake up much like he did, face damp and sore."

"Woah." Eddie mumbled.

15. Shower

"E-Eddie?" Richie stared in the doorway. He was barely wrapped in a towel, water dripping from his hair onto his glasses, which were fogging up at the edges. "What are you doing?" His eyes were wide,

"I-" Eddie looked between the notebook and Richie. "Shit! Sorry, I shouldn't have been snooping, I just-"

"It's okay..." He sat down on the bed, towel draping at his hips. Eddie could see his v-line as his face grew substantially hotter. "It's kinda embarrassing..." He scratched the back of his head, and showed off an awkward smile. "Isn't it?"

"No! Richie!" He looked down at the words lining the page. "This is really good! Why didn't you tell me you could write?" He sat down next to Richie, notebook open in hand.

"B-Because I can't!"

"Richie..."

"No!" He palmed his forehead. "Everything I write sucks! It never turns out how I want..."

"Rich... look at me." Eddie grabbed his face, tilted his head so their eyes met. "Your writing is beautiful, and I'd love to hear more of it when you're ready to share." He smiled.

"Eds..." He kissed his cheek. "Thank you." He smirked, eyes shining in the low, natural light from the windows. Eddie glowed, cheeks a burning rose.

He placed a small hand on Richie's hip, playing with the edge of his towel.

"Hi~" Eddie leaned their faces closer with a smirk.

"H-Hey?" Richie grew completely flustered at this new Eddie, not that he was complaining.

Eddie smashed their lips together hungrily, moving his hand to the small of Richie's bare back. His wet curls were dripping onto Eddie's face, making him smile in the strange comfort. Richie ran his hands through Eddie's soft hair, brushing it back and away from his face. Eddie pulled back slowly, savoring the taste of Richie's lips; cigarettes and chocolate.

"I think it's my turn to shower, Rich." Eddie hummed with a smirk, tapping his fingers along the curve of his waist.

"Aw... but it was just getting good." He pouted.

"Yeah, yeah."

"Want me to help you?"

Richie wasn't sure that was too far or not, but he'd been to hopelessly in love with this boy for far too long to care.

"Uhm..." Eddie grinned. "Sure." Richie stared back at him with large eyes. Eddie grabbed him by the hand, pulling him up into a chaste kiss, before slowly walking down the dim hallway. The floorboards creaked as they walked, so close together, they shared the same smile. Richie's heart was in his chest, no- his throat. He could barely make out any words. They slid into the bathroom, staring and smiling at each other, arms wrapped around one another.

Richie kissed down Eddie's neck, stopping to take off Eddie's shirt. He pulled it over his head, pining after how cute and chubby he was. He moved down his chest, leaving a trail of light kisses. Eddie smiled.

"Okay, okay." He giggled. He fucking giggled. "I can take it from here." He pushed himself away from Richie, turning on the already mostly-warm water.

"Jesus." Richie groaned. "You're driving me crazy here, Eds." He leaned on the bathroom counter.

"Rich, we've literally been dating for like, a day. I think you can wait a little longer."

"But I caaaaaaan't." He moped, resting his hand on Eddie's smooth

hip.

"Out, lemme shower." He grumbled.

"You sure I can't join you?" He smirked.

"Out!"

Eddie shoved him out the door and slammed it behind him. Richie could hear the trickling water and Eddie's subtle movements. It was peaceful in its own way. Richie slumped over to their bedroom, searching through his bags for a pair of sweats, and a loose Nirvana t-shirt that Stan gave him for Christmas. He began scribbling something down in his notebook, when the white noise of the shower lulled him to sleep, nestling into Eddie's favorite soft-blanket.

It wasn't long before Eddie shook him awake.

"Richie-e-e, you're the only one who knows how to cook in the house and I'm hung-ryy."

He blinked away, groaning as he rubbed his eyes. He smiled and shook his head at Eddie.

"I really need to teach you to cook..." He sighed. "What do you want, anyway?"

"Omelet?" He grinned like a small puppy begging for food.

"Fine, okay." He gave in.

Richie whipped up two omelets, one for him and Eddie, and made it just how Eddie liked: piles of vegetables, tons of cheese, and garlic. So. Much. Garlic. But Richie couldn't complain, he was a pretty dang good cook.

They ate at the kitchen table, which had gone unused for years. It was much better than what Eddie used to do; eat upstairs in his room, alone. It was nice for once to have company, especially since he enjoyed said company, and said company enjoyed him.

They eventually headed back upstairs to their room. Richie was

swaying along to a record, on the record player Eddie hadn't used in years. Eddie was sprawled out on the bed, sketching out a couple of character designs, when he remembered something.

"Hol' up!" He jolted out of bed and raced towards the bathroom, quickly returning with two small glass bottles. One blue, the other black. "I forgot 'bout these." He handed the black one to Richie.

"What...?"

"It's nail polish, I thought it might be fun." He grinned.

"Oh my god, that's so gay."

"Richie, we're gay."

"I mean- true." He smiled.

They sat at Eddie's clean, organized desk, sharing a chair. They both tried their hardest to paint their own nails, but Eddie's ended up janky and messy, covering the edges of his fingers in polish. He looked over to Richie's.

"Wh- how?" He yelled, grabbing Richie's wrist. "It's so good!" He gawked at the neatly-painted black nails Richie had done.

"I may have done this a couple of times." He shrugged. "Lemme help you."

He took Eddie's hand and used an acetone-soaked q-tip to clean up the edges. Eddie watched calmly, enjoying the care of Richie's large, gentle hands.

"There you go." The lines were much neater.

"Thank you, Rich." He placed a small kiss on Richie's jaw, grinning against his skin.

"Mm." He hummed, kissing Eddie once on the lips.

16. Domestic Life

They pulled their faces apart. Eddie gave him that shy smile that he always did. Richie could feel his heart beating against his ribcage, the beat flowed through his body. Eddie bit his bottom lip.

"Oh my god..." Richie grumbled. "You're killing me, Eds."

Eddie chuckled and cupped Richie's jaw before pulling him back in. His soft lips brushed against Richie's, sending shivers down his back. Richie gripped his waist, pushing their chests parallel. Eddie deepened their kiss, pulling him in even closer, if that's even possible. Richie could feel Eddie nipping at his bottom lip. Richie had to force himself from crying. It all felt too good to be true. Every moment with Eddie felt like heaven. Richie slipped his hands underneath Eddie's pajama shorts, gripping onto his bare hip. Eddie moaned under his breath.

He pulled away, eyes open and shocked. His lips were parted. They both smirked and broke out into laughter. Richie pressed his head to Eddie's chest.

"Fuck, you sound amazing..." Richie mumbled, causing Eddie to giggle.

"Well, I didn't mean for that to happen, but if you like it then I guess it's okay." He shrugged. He brushed his hand through Richie's curls, kissing the top of his head.

"It's more than okay." He smiled against the fabric of Eddie's shirt.

Eddie lifted Richie's face to meet his, grinning before kissing him again. It was urgent when they mashed their lips together. Eddie gripped the collar of Richie's shirt. This time, Eddie bit Richie's bottom lip, causing him to jerk back.

"Shit, sorry, I forgot about your lip." Eddie chuckled nervously.

"It's okay." He grinned. "Kinda kinky if you ask me..." Eddie ran his finger over Richie's lip and shook his head.

"Don't ruin this."

"Okay."

They reconnected, and absolutely nothing mattered. In between lights kisses, Richie smiled, while Eddie brought him in for more. They both felt amazing. They pulled apart for a second, and Eddie was about to whisper something when the doorbell rang and interrupted their embrace. He rolled his eyes and sighed.

"We better go and answer that, huh spaghetti?" Richie smirked.

"Don't call me that." He giggled. He lifted himself off the chair and dragged Richie behind him. The doorbell rang again, echoing throughout the house. "Just a second!" Eddie yelled, running down the stairs pulling Richie, who struggled to keep up with him. He eventually made it to the door, and hastily opened it out of breath. "How can I-"

"Ashton?" Richie interrupted him, gazing at the exhausted girl on the front porch. She was taller than Eddie, a little shorter than Richie. She had medium, dark, wavy hair that draped over her face, in front of her dark, dramatic eyes. Her face was plagued with freckles, over her pale skin. She wore a thin-strapped creme colored dress that went down to her knees, green and warm-brown flowers covering the fabric. A royal blue jean-jacket draped her shoulders. She had an olive green backpack as well.

"H-Hey, Richie." She cleared her throat. "I thought I might find you here."

Richie moved past Eddie, standing face to face with Ashton.

"I thought you lived with Jaden?" He placed a hand on her arm. "What happened?"

"J-Jade and I got into a fight. I really big one." She sighed. "I need somewhere to sleep, and I stopped by our old house, but was greeted with lots of screaming. They were talking about how you left, and I figured you would stay with Eddie." She shrugged.

"You... remembered..." Tears lined his eyes, and all Eddie could do

was sit back and watch, thoroughly confused.

"Of course I did." She smiled warmly, but she still looked tired. It had been a rough few days.

"Ash..." He pulled her into a hug. "God, I missed you." He mumbled, resting his head on her shoulder. "Of course you can stay here, right?" He pulled away and looked back at Eddie expectantly.

"Yes." He smiled. "Of course it's okay." Although he still didn't really know who this was, he trusted Richie. "Come in." He waved them inside.

Richie pulled her inside. After she slipped off her shoes, Eddie showed her Sonia's old room, it's not like she would be needing it anymore. The room was still meticulously organized. The sheets were freshly washed. She took off her jacket and set it down on the bed, along with her backpack. While she was getting comfortable, Eddie pulled Richie aside.

"Who is she?" He whispered to Richie.

"My sister."

"Sister? I thought you had a brother who moved out." He stared at him questioningly.

"That's kinda why she moved out. My parents couldn't accept her as a gay girl, so she moved to live with her girlfriend." He chuckled in a hush. "Kinda like us." He grinned. "But they especially couldn't accept her as a girl. Some people call it being transsexual or transgender, but she's just plain ol' Ash to me."

"Oh, okay." Eddie said blankly.

"What?"

"I mean, I've never met someone who switched genders, but I've definitely heard of it." He shrugged. "Anyways, it doesn't bother me or anything. You just never really mentioned anything about her. Like, I knew you had a sibling but I'd never met them."

"Yeah, I didn't think about how any of you would react, so I kinda just stayed quiet. I mean, sure, it was hard at first, since she was moving all the way to New Hampshire, but we send letters every now and then, so I got through it." Eddie rubbed his shoulders.

"I wish you'd told me..." He looked down.

"Hey, It's okay." He tilted up Eddie's chin. "I'm okay." He smiled.

"Hey I hate to interrupt you guys, but I kinda need to talk to Richie." Ashton spoke. They pulled apart, faces flushed. She smirked. "If that's okay."

"Y-Yeah." Eddie sputtered. "Sure." He smiled awkwardly. It was weird to be that intimate around others, but it was strangely comforting.

Richie shot him a smile before heading towards Ashton's room with her. They both quietly sat down on the bed, before Ash broke the silence with a grin.

"TELL ME EVERYTHING" She giggled.

"About what?" He smirked.

"When did you guys start dating?? And you live with him now?? I mean, you told me you were in love with him, but I didn't know he was into dudes." The words fell out of her mouth rapidly. Richie had to pause to think over her words, before answering.

"Well... um..." He took in a breath. "It pretty much all happened today. Like, we kinda confessed to each other yesterday but we made it official today, and I also moved in. It's all been moving kinda fast, I have to admit. A lot of shit's gone down." He chuckled.

"How- YOU TWO ALREADY ACT LIKE YOU'RE MARRIED" She screeched. "My boi, you've got game." She wrapped her arm around his shoulder.

"It's not... game. It's love." He smiled cheesily. "Also, for the record, you can't tell anyone. You know what the people are like here-"

"I won't, you can trust me." She nodded triumphantly like a three-

year-old. "Now, go get your boy, I won't bother you anymore." She patted him on the back. "I'm gonna just go to bed."

"Okay, Eddie and I both have school tomorrow, so you can just help yourself to a bowl of cereal or something JUST DON'T BURN THE HOUSE DOWN."

"I WON'T" She huffed. "Now go have fun with your boy, and try to keep it down, okay?" She grinned.

"We're not- okay, whatever." He rolled his eyes and smiled, before leaving the room and heading back towards Eddie, who was already on his bed.

He plopped down next to him, nuzzling his face in Eddie's shoulder. Eddie giggled, intertwining his fingers with Richie.

"Everything okay?" He gleamed.

"Yeah... just tired. A lot of things have happened in the past few days." He pulled the covers over both of them.

"Mm." Eddie kissed the top of his head. "Wanna sleep?"

"Yeah, that'd be nice."

Richie snuggled into Eddie's arms, pressing his face into his chest. That was his favorite spot. He could feel Eddie's chest rising every time he took a breath. His arms cradled him with warmth. Richie slowly let his eyes fall shut, drifting off to sleep.